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ABSTRACT

Low-income women, ages 18 to 59, attending basic adult education classes (DHS group) or community college development classes (DEV group) in rural East Tennessee, completed questionnaires examining their occupational possible selves and their locus of control. The two groups were compared as to their number of hoped-for and feared occupational selves; affective intensity and perceived likelihood of their most hoped-for self and their most feared self; presence of a role model for their most hoped-for self; self-initiated actions taken to achieve their most hoped-for self and avoid their most feared self; and their Spheres of Control scores. No significant differences existed between the groups in the number of hoped-for and feared selves generated nor in the total number of role models reported. Both groups reported more role models for feared selves than for hoped-for selves. Affective intensity for the most hoped-for self was significantly higher for the DEV group. No significant differences were found in affective intensity for feared selves. Both groups assessed likelihood of their most hoped-for selves higher than likelihood of their most feared selves, but the DEV group expressed significantly greater likelihood of achieving their most hoped-for self. Internal locus of control was a significant predictor of likelihood of the most hoped-for self, but there were no significant predictors of likelihood of the most feared self. Implications for professionals working with low-income women are discussed. (Contains 2 tables and 30 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Occupational Possible Selves of Low-Income Women

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Abstract

Low-income women, ages 18 to 59 attending adult basic education classes (DHS group) or community college developmental classes (DEV group) in rural East Tennessee, completed questionnaires examining their occupational possible selves and their locus of control. The two groups were compared as to their number of hoped-for and feared occupational selves, affective intensity and perceived likelihood of their most hoped-for self and their most feared self, presence of a role model for their most hoped-for self, self-initiated actions taken to achieve their most hoped-for self and avoid their most feared self, and their Spheres of Control scores.

No significant differences existed between the groups in the number of hoped-for and feared selves generated nor in the total number of role models reported. Both groups reported more role models for feared selves than for hoped-for selves.

Affective intensity for the most hoped-for self was significantly higher for the DEV group. No significant differences were found in affective intensity for feared selves. Both groups assessed likelihood of their most hoped-for selves higher than likelihood of their most feared selves, but the DEV group expressed significantly greater likelihood of achieving their most hoped-for self.

Internal locus of control was a significant predictor of likelihood of the most hoped-for self, but there were no significant predictors of likelihood of the most feared self. Implications for professionals working with low-income women are discussed.

The Occupational Possible Selves of Low-Income Women

Today, 80 percent of families composed of a teenaged mother and her children live on public assistance, and the number of mother-headed families continues to rise (Annie E Casey Foundation, 1998). Public assistance recipients, however, are not the only poor women in America; about one-fourth of the poor are families in which the head of the household works full-time but has less than a high school education (Acs, 1999). Historically, poor women have been viewed as economic capital (e.g., jobs are available; therefore, poor women should fill them). This labor-market view ignores employment factors such as childcare, transportation, proximity of available jobs, educational preparation, and - perhaps the most crucial factor of all - emotional health (Aaronson & Hartmann, 1996; Axinn & Hirsch, 1993; Bowen, Desimone, & McKay, 1995). Rice (1997) and Sidel (1996) urge a human capital approach with attention to self-concept, personal efficacy, and incentives for future behavior. The Task Force of Division 35 of the American Psychological Association (1997) has called for research concentrating on poor women as human capital. Sanchez-Hucles and Gamble (1997) have cited a need for "more research... directed towards identifying personal strengths and resiliency factors that increase successful work participation" (p. 22).

Two important resiliency factors are self-concept and personal efficacy. It is vital to understand what poor women believe about themselves, perceive themselves capable of accomplishing, and fear that they might become in the future. These beliefs and fears about the future self have been called "possible selves" (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and are believed to provide the key motivational pattern for change (Hooker, 1999; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kissoegolou, 1998). As the possible self has not been explored among poor women, it is not known whether they have experienced the positive conditions and seen the role models required to balance their negative experiences with plausible, positive future occupational selves.

Welfare reforms have called attention to assistance recipients; however, attention should be paid to other groups of low-income women as well. Low educational attainment, living in the South, and living in a rural area place women at risk of perpetually low incomes (Acs, 1999). For this reason, two groups of low-income women have been included in this study, public assistance recipients and low-income non-assistance recipients living in the rural South.

Markus and Nurius (1986) describe the possible self as providing a "format or plan for action" (p. 286) for the selves one could become. Maximal motivation toward a goal occurs when "it is balanced by a countervailing possible self in the same domain" (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994, p. 135). Oyserman and Markus (1990) found negative possible selves to be beneficial only when specific possible selves provided an alternative vision of how to avoid the negative possible self. For example, being employed (a positive, hoped-for self) may require a balance with being homeless (a negative, feared self) in order to motivate one to choose studying for a diploma over watching television.

Meara, Day and Chalk (1995) add that "possible selves need to include the anticipated affective experiences associated with attaining important goals" (p. 260). This link between cognition and emotion is reflected by the intensity of the hope or fear of an outcome. In effect, the individual needs to anticipate the pride the diploma may bring as well as to know that a link exists between studying and that anticipated pride. Hooker (1999) states that choosing identity-relevant goals and engaging in purposeful behaviors reflects how much the individual desires a particular outcome. The relevance of the goal is related to what is at stake; this cost, in turn, determines the potential for emotion in the situation. For assistance recipients, who have been mandated to attend school or train for jobs, affective intensity might well be affected by both identity relevance and degree of desire for the educational or career goal.

According to Cross and Markus (1994) possible selves enable bridging the present self

with the future self through specific actions designed to bring about the desired result. The lives of poor women reflect impediments to that bridging process. The desired results may be limited by socialization experiences, encouraged childlike behavior and the absence of positive role models (Atwood and Genovese, 1993). Hoskins and Leseko (1996) assert that possible selves serve as behavioral blueprints, but that the blueprints rely on previous competencies, models and examples, factors which for the low-income woman may well be negative.

Selected factors which may influence the possible selves of low-income women are work experience and education. Contrary to assumptions, assistance recipients often do work; in fact, according to the Tennessee Department of Human Services (1999), 32.8 percent of recipients have worked within the last year. The problems with their employment, however, lie in their lack of seniority and the temporary nature of many jobs, both of which affect lay-off status (Mulroy, 1995). Educationally, 63 percent do not have high school diplomas, a factor which results in low-paying, gender-traditional jobs (Sanchez-Hucles & Gamble, 1997).

This study describes the occupational possible selves of low-income women, assesses locus of control as it pertains to personal efficacy, and determines whether environment and attribution affect the occupational hopes and fears of low-SES women. In addition, the study was designed to ascertain whether environmental and personal differences exist between poor women who receive public assistance and those who do not.

Methodology

Participants were 95 women recruited through the Adult Basic Education classes of the Tennessee Department of Human Services in eight rural East Tennessee counties (DHS group) and 104 women recruited through community developmental classes serving the same eight-county area (DEV group). The women in the DHS group receive public assistance and are required to enroll in an educational program (i.e., Adult Basic Education classes), whereas the

women in the DEV group voluntarily are attending developmental classes at a local community college. Women in both groups reported incomes within the range defined as low-income by the U.S. Department of Labor (2000).

All participants were given a packet containing three instruments in the following order: Demographic Questionnaire, Possible Selves Questionnaire, and the Personal Efficacy Subscale of the Spheres of Control Scale. All questionnaires were administered orally and in the same order. The demographic questionnaire was designed by the researcher to assess variables previously found to be relevant to self-concept and/or career development. Included were age, income, number in the household, number of children, age at the time of first child's birth, race, and marital status. Educational attainment of the participant and her parents or their surrogates and work history of the participant were requested. A question assessing perceived general health was also included.

The open-ended version of the Possible Selves Questionnaire developed by Porter, Markus, and Nurius (1984) and reported on by Markus and Nurius (1986) was used. Likert-type scales similar to those of Chalk (1996), Knox (1997), Cross and Markus (1994), and Hooker (1999) were adapted for this questionnaire. Participants were asked to generate up to six hoped-for and up to six feared occupational possible selves, to rate the likelihood of each possible self, to rate how much they hope for or fear each possible self, and to indicate whether they have seen the possible self modeled by someone personally known to them. For the most feared self and the most hoped-for self, participants were asked to describe what they are doing to achieve their most hoped-for and avoid their most feared self. For the question of what participants are doing to achieve/avoid a behavior, coding as to self-initiated or other-initiated behaviors was necessary. This was done by two educators with M.S. degrees who were unfamiliar with the premises of the study.

The Spheres of Control Scale, Personal Efficacy Subscale, by Paulhus and Christie (Leftcourt, 1991) was used to assess locus of control. Scores for the ten items, which address personal perceptions relevant to goal achievement, were recorded for each participant to establish

an individual mean subscale score which was then used in the statistical analysis.

Results

Demographically, the incomes of the DEV group (mean = $14,084) were significantly higher than those of the DHS group (mean = $4,549), their ages were significantly lower than those of the DHS group, and they had a significantly lower number of children than did the DHS group. Their ages at the time of their first child's birth were not significantly different. Results of a chi square analysis indicated significantly higher educational attainment of both the DEV participants ,X^2 (1,N = 199) = 78.202, p<.001, and their mothers, X^2 (1,N = 187) = 18.166, p< .001. Chi square procedures indicated that the DHS group reported significantly poorer health [X^2 (4,N = 199) = 6.06, p = <.05] and a significantly higher incidence of sexual [X^2 (1,N = 199) = 4.43, p = .035] and physical abuse [X^2 (1,N = 199) = 4.64, p = .035] than did the DEV group,

A one-way MANOVA indicated that the groups did not differ significantly as to the number of possible occupational selves generated [F(2,196) = .87, p = .420]. For both groups significantly more hoped-for than feared selves were reported. To test affective intensity, a one-way MANOVA was performed, results indicating significant differences between the two groups [F (2,179) = 5.393, p <.001] . One-way ANOVAs supported significantly lower affect for hoped-for selves for the DHS group than for the DEV group [F (1,180) = 10.11, p = .002], but no significant differences between the two groups as to feared selves.

The results of a one-way MANOVA indicated a significant difference in the two groups in perceived likelihood [F (2,177) = 10.13, p<.001] of obtaining the identified possible selves. The DHS group rated likelihood of achieving their most hoped-for selves significantly lower than did the DEV group [F (1,178) = 18.26, p <.001], but the two groups were not significantly different in rating their perceived likelihood of becoming their most feared selves. Both groups assessed likelihood of obtaining their hoped-for selves significantly higher than their likelihood of

becoming their most feared selves.

There were no significant differences in the number of role models reported by the two groups for most hoped-for selves or for most feared selves. Both groups, however, did report a significantly greater percentage of role models for their most feared self (88 percent) than for their most hoped-for self (69 percent).

As to locus of control, DHS participants reported significantly fewer self-initiated actions to achieve their most hoped-for self than did the DEV participants as tested by a chi square [X^2 (1, N = 183) = 34.95, $p < .001$]. Among DEV participants, 100 percent reported self-initiated actions compared with 69 percent of the DHS group. A second chi square comparison indicated that DHS participants reported significantly fewer self-initiated actions to avoid becoming their most feared self [X^2 (1,159) = 28.95, $p < .001$] . Eighty-nine percent of the DEV group reported self-initiated actions, whereas 50.7 percent of the DHS group did so. Participants from the DHS group scored significantly lower than did the DEV group on the Spheres of Control, Personal Efficacy Subscale.

A multiple regression analysis using as predictors (a) group membership, (b) attained educational level of participants, (c) balance between the numbers of hoped-for and feared selves, and (d) Spheres of Control Scores supported a significant amount of variance in predicting participants' perceived likelihood of achieving their most hoped-for selves (Table 1). Only Spheres of Control, however, was a significant predictor of hoped-for selves (p = .020), although educational attainment and group membership tended toward significance (p = .062 and p = .067, respectively).

A multiple regression analysis using the same four predictors as above was performed to test for which variables would contribute to the prediction of the likelihood of participants' becoming their most feared selves. No predictors of feared selves were significant.

Discussion

Educational attainment appears to offer advantages to low-income women. Generally, the greater the participant's educational attainment, the more she expects to achieve her occupational hopes.

Balancing hoped-for and feared selves should theoretically have motivational consequences. That almost five times as many of the DHS group, who had been mandated to remediate educational deficiencies by attending basic education classes, did not report a feared self suggests that these participants were less motivated than the individuals who did balance a most hoped-for with a most feared self. By contrast, most of the DEV group, who presumably were attending college by choice, generated at least one countervailing feared self. Motivational levels for the DEV group appear to be higher than for the DHS group. These findings are, in fact, consistent with Yowell's (2000) study of Latino youth, which noted a similar significant imbalance between hoped-for and feared occupational selves. This imbalance may reflect negative experiences the DHS women previously have had, rendering occupational fears relatively inconsequential.

An identity-relevant goal and purposeful behaviors leading toward it reflect affective intensity. The relevance of a goal is related to the cost, which drives the affect. Results of this study suggest that the DEV group's most hoped-for selves are more identity relevant and reflect greater desire for their achievement than those of the DHS group.

Possible selves reflect the comparisons one makes between oneself and others. The lower affective intensity of the hoped-for selves of the DHS group may reflect somewhat unattainable possible selves compared with what these women have seen modeled by others. One can speculate further that, based on previous research (Leondari, et al., 1998; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Yowell, 2000), the affect associated with the hoped-for selves of the DEV group reflects a social context that allows for self-comparisons leading to greater self-relevance, more organization, and more

direction than do the hoped-for selves of the DHS group.

Affective intensity for feared selves was not significantly different for the two groups. There was, however, considerable variability in affective intensity of feared selves for women in both groups. Affective power is related to implausibility, thus, results of the affective scores for the most feared self suggest that women in both groups consider their feared selves less plausible than their hoped-for selves.

Both groups reported fewer role models for hoped-for selves than for feared selves. Environmental factors may have influenced these results, as both of these groups are rural residents (Conrad, 1998). Betz (1994) notes the lack of female role models specifically in education and the corresponding lack of female mentors. Given her view that educational institutions do not markedly increase the number of positive female role models, a mitigating effect of educational level on the most hoped-for self would not be expected. For the low-income rural female, role models for occupational hoped-for selves are generally few, regardless of educational level. Results suggest, however, that the social context for observing occupational role models for feared selves is more likely to be present than is the social context for observing hoped-for selves.

Women who believe in their own ability to influence outcomes in their lives likewise perceive themselves as more effectual in achieving their occupational hopes. This perception that one can control outcomes is crucial to one's predicted likelihood of attaining her most hoped-for self, but not to predicted likelihood of her most feared self. More DEV participants than DHS participants viewed future accomplishments as resulting from their own initiative. Scores of the two groups on the Spheres of Control, Personal Efficacy Subscale, likewise, demonstrate that the DHS group perceive greater external control of their lives and express generally weaker agreement with statements reflecting internal locus of control than do members of the DEV group. Both groups, however, had scores above the midpoint of the Spheres of Control, Personal

Efficacy Subscale. This degree of perceived control indicates an area of relative strength for the low-income woman.

Implications for Professionals

Counseling psychologists work from the perspective of client strengths. That a majority in both groups demonstrated an internal locus of control is a strength upon which counseling psychologists might build. For individuals who seem to be more self-initiating or who perceive themselves to be self-initiating, a possible self can be a more potent motivator than it may be for those who are less self-initiating. Taking into account multicultural factors, professionals should reinforce the low-income woman's belief in the power of her own persistence and her own ability to control outcomes. Psychologists do, however, need to be realistic about what control clients have over their lives. It is important to understand the limitations of being poor; but, within the bounds of her culture, it is worthwhile to enhance the client's perception of the control she does have. Through reinforcement of the client's achievements and reframing of her present levels of achievement, one can work in areas where the client can have success with control, moving later into other areas. The incidence of abuse in both of these groups suggests a need for careful assessment of the safety of the low-income client. As one works to increase the client's perception of control, it is important to be aware of potential threats to her safety.

Much affective work has been done with imagery and sports, but many of the same applications might be made to low-income women and employment. Psychologists should consider ways to help low-income women experience vicarious affect associated with their hoped-for selves. Reflecting upon times when she was required to use some of her strengths and assets and recalling the affect from those experiences would be appropriate.

Rural individuals may have limited experiences with occupations, but this limitation does not necessarily reflect limited occupational hopes. Although the DEV group expressed greater likelihood of achievement, they too have limited personal contact with individuals who might

become their role models. More attention might be paid to introducing occupational diversity at an early age and to providing opportunities for contact with persons who do the work both groups of these women might aspire to do. Mentoring by women who have made the difficult transition from poverty to self-support might well be a powerful intervention.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study, limited to low-income rural Appalachian women, reflects the experiences of predominantly Caucasian women, all of whom were attending classes. For the DEV group, education was voluntary; for the DHS group, education was mandatory. As students, these groups represent a special subsample of low-income women; results may therefore not generalize to other groups of low-income women or to other areas of the country. A second limitation may be an order effect created by always placing hoped-for selves before feared selves in the questionnaire, possibly influencing the numbers of responses generated. Other arrangements of the possible selves questionnaires might be considered.

This study demonstrates differences in locus of control of the two groups, but without additional study, it cannot be said why this is the case. It appears that the DEV participants have already exercised some control over their lives by seeking additional education. Marks (1998) notes that cultural factors promote differences in perceptions of the worth of internal locus of control. Qualitative studies would facilitate an exploration of the sources of the DHS groups's beliefs that others are in control of their futures and might elucidate whether, for this group, external locus of control is promoted by significant others.

Finally, asking questions about the personal costs and benefits of career training for the low-income woman might be productive. Cultural differences between low-income Appalachian women's and other women's occupational hopes and fears and the personal costs of achieving them might well affect results. Many of the assumptions made about career development apply to traditional students, but not necessarily to the non-traditional women in this study.

Further study is indicated in the areas of likelihood of avoiding feared selves, in the effects of balance on likelihood, and in the degree of elaboration of the selves of low-income women. Examining the career maturity and the plausibility of the low-income woman's possible selves would reveal more information than is presently available. Qualitative studies would be appropriate and helpful in this area. The beliefs and perceptions of low-income women offer information about their strengths and their needs, but more information about the lives of poor women is needed. The stakes are high for both the present and future generations.

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Table 1

Multiple Regression for Predicting Likelihood of the Most Hoped-for Selves with Variables: Spheres of Control, Balance between Hoped-for and Feared Selves, Group Membership, and Educational Level of Participant*

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	4.031	.730		5.525	.000
Spheres	.032	.014	.168	2.348	.020
Education	.434	.231	.165	1.879	.062
Group	-.406	.220	-.159	-1.844	.067
Balance	.009	.065	.001	.015	.988

Note. $R^2 = .151$; $p < .05$.

*In a multiple regression for predicting feared selves and using these same four predictors, no predictors were significant.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Hoped-for Selves, Feared Selves, and Spheres of Control, Personal Efficacy Subscale

	Total Sample			DEV			DHS		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Hoped-for Selves	199	3.58	1.69	104	3.49	1.59	95	3.67	1.80
Feared Selves	199	2.71	1.52	104	2.53	1.49	95	2.42	1.80
Hoped-for Affect*	199	3.73	.53	104	3.85	.44	95	3.61	.59
Feared Affect	182	3.11	.95	100	3.07	.97	82	3.13	.89
Hoped Likelihood*	198	5.77	1.28	104	6.15	.76	94	5.35	1.57
Feared Likelihood	180	3.14	1.91	100	2.97	1.86	80	3.36	1.97
Spheres of Control*	199	5.10	.63	103	5.30	.61	95	4.91	.64

* Significant difference between the two groups, $p < .01$.